

Bible Covenants



“Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments...” (Deuteronomy 7:9)

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Introduction

- I. The word *covenant* occurs 319 times in the New King James Version of the Bible.
 - A. In the simplest form, a covenant is an agreement between two parties and involves promises on the part of each to the other.
 - B. The idea of a covenant between a holy God and His people is one of the central themes of the Bible.
- II. In the Biblical sense a covenant implies much more than a contract or a simple agreement between two parties.
 - A. A covenant is “a solemn agreement between two or more parties, made binding by some sort of oath” (“Covenant,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*).
 - B. “A *covenant* is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance” (“Covenant,” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*).
 - C. Most contracts have an end date, but a covenant is thought of as a permanent arrangement.
 - D. Another difference is that a contract generally involves only one part of a person, such as a skill, while a covenant involves the person’s total being.
- III. The word for *covenant* in the Old Testament also provides additional insight into the meaning of this important idea.
 - A. “The technical language used when covenants were made was ‘to cut a covenant’ (*karat berit*). This terminology referred to ritual sacrifices that accompanied covenant making. Often animals sacrificed would be cut in two. In some covenant rituals part of the animal would be eaten by the covenanting parties and part burned in honor of their god. Sometimes the parties would walk symbolically between the pieces of the animal. In any case, the shedding of blood in such rituals signified the solemnity of the covenant, each party vowing not to break the covenant on pain of death.” (“Covenant,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)
 - B. This explains the strange custom of two people passing through the cut bodies of slain animals after making an agreement (Jer 34:18–20).
 1. Ancient Hittite and Assyrian texts describe ceremonies where people would walk between severed halves of animals as they made covenants.
 2. “The Hittite ritual is similar to its Biblical counterpart, but the Assyrian texts may help us to understand its true significance. Essentially, these rites served as self-imprecation oaths, by which people called down curses upon their own heads should they fail to keep their part of the covenant they were solemnly ratifying. The ritual was a way of saying, ‘May what happened to these animals happen to us if we break this covenant.’ Zedekiah’s covenant symbolized what would befall covenant-breakers. In this case Zedekiah and his people did break the covenant, and the death and destruction the ritual enacted were indeed the outcome.” (Kaiser, *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 1251)
 3. A ritual or ceremony such as this always accompanied the making of a covenant in the Old Testament.

- C. Sometimes those entering into a covenant shared a holy meal, such as when Laban and Jacob made their covenant (Gen 31:54).
 - D. Abraham and his male descendants were commanded to be circumcised as a “sign of covenant” between them and God (Gen 17:10–11).
 - E. Moses sprinkled the blood of animals on the altar and upon the people who entered into covenant with God at Mount Sinai (Exod 24:3–8).
- IV. The Old Testament contains many examples of covenants between people who related to each other as equals.
- A. The covenant between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:27, 32).
 - B. The covenant between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:26–31).
 - C. The covenant between Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:43–54).
 - D. The covenant between David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:3).
 - E. The covenant between David and Abner (2 Sam 3:12–13).
 - F. The covenant between David and the elders of Israel (2 Sam 5:3).
 - G. The covenant between Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 5:12).
 - H. King Asa of Judah led his people to make a covenant to seek the Lord after many years of rebellion (2 Chr 15:9–15).
 - I. Marriage is understood to be a covenant as well (Mal 2:14).
- V. In this booklet we want to examine five covenants between God and man.
- VI. The extraordinary thing about God’s covenant with His people is that God is holy, all-knowing, and all powerful; but He condescended to enter into covenant with weak and sinful men.

Discussion

I. The Noahic Covenant

- A. Even before the time of Abraham, God made a covenant with Noah, assuring him that He would never again destroy the world by flood (Gen 9:11).
- B. Noah lived at a time when the whole earth was filled with violence, yet he did not allow the evil standards of his day to rob him of fellowship with God.
 - 1. Noah stood out as the only one who “walked with God” (Gen 6:8–9), as was also true of his great-grandfather Enoch (Gen 5:22).
 - 2. The Lord singled out Noah from all his contemporaries and chose him as the man to accomplish a great work.
 - 3. God promised to establish a covenant with Noah (Gen 6:17–18).
- C. When God saw the wickedness that prevailed in the world (Gen 6:5), He told Noah of His intention to destroy the ancient world by a universal flood.
 - 1. God instructed Noah to build an ark (a large barge) in which he and his family would survive the catastrophe.
 - 2. Noah believed God and obeyed Him and “according to all that God commanded him, so he did” (Gen 6:22).
 - 3. Noah is listed among the heroes of faith (Heb 11:7).
- D. With unswerving confidence in God, Noah started building the ark.
 - 1. During this time Noah continued to preach God’s judgment and mercy, warning the ungodly of their approaching doom (2 Pet 2:5).
 - 2. He preached for 120 years, however, without any converts (1 Pet 3:20).
 - 3. People continued in their evil ways and turned deaf ears to his pleadings and warnings until they were overtaken by the flood.

- E. When the ark was ready, Noah entered in with all kinds of animals “and the Lord shut him in” (Gen 7:16), and he was cut off completely from the rest of mankind.
- F. When the waters of the great flood receded, Noah was grateful to the Lord who had delivered him from the worldwide disaster.
 - 1. After the flood he built an altar to God and made a sacrifice, which God accepted graciously (Gen 8:20–22).
 - 2. The Lord promised Noah and his descendants that He would never again destroy the world with a universal flood.
 - 3. The Lord made an everlasting covenant with Noah and his descendants, establishing the *rainbow* as the sign of His covenant (Gen 9:1–17).
 - 4. This rainbow covenant called for no human response.
 - 5. “The rainbow in the clouds speaks to humankind from God. God allowed Noah to understand what the bow meant to him: a visible declaration that the Lord will never again destroy the earth by flood. The rainbow, then, is God’s promise made visible. Covenant signs express covenant promises to covenant people.” (Kaiser, *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 17)
 - 6. One part of the covenant involved the sanctity of human life, i.e., that “whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man” (Gen 9:6).
 - 7. “Following his comments about the killing of animals, God addresses the issue of homicide. Violence by ‘all flesh’ (v. 11), i.e., by man and animals, prompted God to send the flood (6:11, 13). If human nature has not improved after the flood (6:5; 8:21), how is violence to be prevented in the future? This legal enactment is the answer: **From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.** This means that any animal or person that takes a human life will be held accountable by God, working through human representatives (e.g., Ex. 20:13; 21:28). **Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.** Here the principle of talion, a life for a life, is applied (see Ex. 21:23)...Human life is to be valued so highly that it is protected by this system of punishment because **God made man in his own image**, and so to murder another human being is to murder what is most like God, and is thus implicitly an attack on God himself.” (*ESV Study Bible*, comments on Gen 9:5–6)

II. The Abrahamic Covenant

- A. In making a covenant with Abraham, God promised to bless his descendants and make them His own special people—in return, Abraham was to remain faithful to God and to serve as a channel of blessing to the rest of the world (Gen 12:1–3).
- B. Abraham’s story begins with his migration with the rest of his family from Ur of the Chaldeans in ancient Babylonia (Gen 11:31).
 - 1. He and his family moved north along the trade routes of the ancient world and settled in the flourishing trade center of Haran.
 - 2. While living in Haran, at the age of 75, Abraham received a call from God to go to a strange, unknown land that God would show him.
 - 3. Apparently, the call in Haran was God’s second call to Abraham (Acts 7:1–4).

- C. God promised Abraham that He would make him the father of a great nation.
 - 1. The promise must have seemed unbelievable to Abraham because his wife, Sarah, was childless (Gen 11:30–31; 17:15).
 - 2. Abraham obeyed God with no hint of doubt or disbelief.
 - 3. He took his wife and his nephew, Lot, and went to the land that God would show him.
- D. Abraham moved south along the trade routes from Haran, through Shechem and Bethel, to the land of Canaan (Gen 12:4–9).
 - 1. Canaan was a populated area at the time, inhabited by the Canaanites.
 - 2. Abraham’s belief that God would ultimately give this land to him and his descendants was an act of faith.
 - 3. The circumstances seemed quite difficult, but Abraham’s faith in God’s promises allowed him to trust in the Lord.
- E. In Genesis 15 the Lord reaffirmed His promise to Abraham.
 - 1. The relationship between God and Abraham was a covenant relationship.
 - 2. Abraham agreed to go to the land that God would show him (an act of faith), and God agreed to make Abraham a great nation (Gen 12:1–3).
 - 3. However, Abraham became anxious about the promise of a nation being found in his descendants because of his advanced age—and the Lord then reaffirmed the earlier covenant.
 - 4. Because Abraham was childless, he proposed to make a slave, Eliezer of Damascus, his heir (Gen 15:1–3).
 - a) We know from recent archaeological discoveries at Nuzi and Larsa (both in Iraq), a common practice of that time among heirless families was to adopt a slave who would inherit the master’s goods.
 - b) “Numerous ancient Near Eastern documents provide for the adoption of a stranger who inherits the estate in return for the performance of filial duties. These include paying the adoptive parents the proper respect, maintaining the household, taking care of their physical needs and comforts in their old age, and performing the funerary rites at their death. In such cases, the adopted son cannot be deprived of a share of the inheritance even if there are subsequently natural-born sons. Thus, God’s emphatic and unambiguous reply in verse 4 can only mean that the patriarch, despairing of having children, had decided to resort to the adoption of his servant but has not yet acted. God assures him that this will not be necessary.” (Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary*, notes on Gen 15:3)
 - 5. God rejected Abraham’s proposal and challenged his faith (Gen 15:4–5).
 - 6. Abraham’s response is the model of believing faith (Gen 15:6; Heb 11:8–16).
 - 7. The rest of Genesis 15 consists of a ceremony between Abraham and God that was commonly used in the ancient world to formalize a covenant (Gen 15:7–21).
 - a) Here we see the cutting of the animals in two.
 - b) God passed between the pieces of the torn flesh (the smoking pot and flaming torch were symbolic of God’s presence).
 - 8. Later, God repeated this covenant to Abraham’s son, Isaac (Gen 17:19).
 - 9. Stephen summarized the story in the book of Acts (Acts 7:1–8).

III. The Mosaic Covenant

- A. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob moved to Egypt during the time of Joseph (Gen 46:1-7).
1. While they were welcomed guests at first, in the process of time a new Pharaoh came arose and turned the Israelites into slaves (Exod 1:8-11).
 2. The people cried out to the God of their forefathers (Exod 2:23-24).
 3. God sent Moses to deliver His people (Exod 3:1-10).
 4. God, through Moses, sent a series of plagues against Pharaoh and “against all the gods of Egypt” (Exod 12:12).
 5. After the plague of the death of the firstborn, Pharaoh sent Moses and the people of God out of Egypt (Exod 12:31-32).
 6. Three months after leaving Egypt the children of Israel camped at the base of Mount Sinai (Exod 19:1-2).
- B. At Sinai God promised to make a *covenant* with the Israelites (Exod 19:3-6).
1. Before they even know the conditions of the contract, the people agreed to abide by whatever God said (Exod 19:7-8).
 2. This covenant was between God and the people of Israel—you and I are not a party in this contract (Deut 5:3; 29:1).
- C. The Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17) are the *foundation* of the covenant, but they are not the *entirety* of it.
1. After receiving the first ten commandments the people asked for the Lord to speak no more (Exod 20:18-20).
 2. While the people stood afar off, Moses drew near to the presence of God to hear the rest of the covenant (Exod 20:21-23:33).
 3. After receiving the Law, Moses spoke the words of the covenant to the people and they agreed to obey (Exod 24:3).
 4. Moses then wrote the conditions of the covenant down, offered sacrifices to God, and then sprinkled both the book and the people with blood to seal the covenant (Exod 24:4-8).
- D. Once the people of God entered the Promised Land they were to recite the blessings and curses of the covenant from Mounts Gerizim and Ebal (Deut 11:26-32; 27:1-8; 28:1-68; Josh 8:30-35).
- E. This covenant between God and the people of Israel was *temporary*—God promised a day in which He would make a *new covenant*, not only with Israel but with all mankind (Jer 31:31-34; cf. Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8-12).

IV. The Davidic Covenant

- A. Another famous covenant was the one between God and King David, a covenant in which David and his descendants were established as the royal heirs to the throne of the nation of Israel (2 Sam 7:12-16).
1. This promise fulfilled the blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant that the patriarchs would be the fathers of kings (Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11).
 2. Abraham’s great-grandson, Judah, was promised that rulers would come through him (Gen 49:10).

3. David knew that he had been chosen by God and that he was a part of the messianic line that would result in a divine King (Ps 2:6-7; 110:1-4).
 4. Ethan the Ezrahite wrote Psalms 89—it is a prayer that God would honor the Davidic Covenant (Ps 89:1-4, 28-37).
- B. Many Old Testament prophets spoke of the Davidic Messiah, the One who would rule on His throne forever.
1. Isaiah (Isa 9:1-7; 11:1-5; cf. Matt 4:13-16).
 2. Jeremiah (Jer 23:5-6; 30:4-11).
 3. Ezekiel (Ezek 34:23-24; cf. John 10:11-18; Ezek 37:24-25).
 4. Amos (Amos 9:11-15; cf. Acts 15:12-21).
- C. The Davidic covenant reached its fulfillment when Jesus, a descendant of the royal lineage of David, was born in Bethlehem about a thousand years after God made a covenant with King David.
1. The gospel of Matthew starts off by showing that Christ “the Son of David” (Matt 1:1), and thus He had the right to rule over God’s people.
 2. The angel Gabriel promised Mary that her Son would sit on “the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33).
 3. Peter said Christ was a fulfillment of God’s promise to David (Acts 2:29-36).
 4. Paul also claimed the Jesus was the fulfillment of this promise (Acts 13:20-24).
 5. James said that Christ did restore the “tabernacle of David” (Acts 15:13-17), which was a fulfillment of the prophesy of Amos (Amos 9:11-12).

V. The Covenant Of Promise

- A. The New Testament makes a clear distinction between covenant of the Mosaic Law and the covenant of promise.
1. The apostle Paul spoke of these *two covenants*, one originating “from Mount Sinai,” the other from “the Jerusalem above” (Gal 4:21-26).
 2. Paul also argued that the covenant established at Mount Sinai was a “ministry of death” and “condemnation” (2 Cor 3:7-11).
 3. The point being that the Mosaic covenant, the Old Law, had no provisions to remove the sins of mankind.
- B. The death of Christ on Calvary’s hill ushered in a new covenant under which we are justified by God’s grace and mercy—it is now possible to have the true forgiveness (remission) of sins.
1. Jesus is the Mediator of this better covenant between God and man (Heb 9:15).
 2. Jesus’ sacrificial death served as the oath, or pledge, which God made to us to seal this new covenant.
 3. He is determined to give us eternal life and fellowship with Him, in spite of our unworthiness.
 4. The new covenant is the new agreement God has made with mankind, based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- C. The promise of a *new covenant* originated with the prophecy of Jeremiah who said that God would accomplish for His people what the old covenant had failed to do (Jer 31:31-34; cf. Heb 8:7-13).
 - 1. Under this new covenant, God would write His Law on human hearts.
 - 2. This suggests a new level of obedience, a new knowledge of the Lord, and the forgiveness of sin.
- D. When Jesus ate His last Passover meal with His disciples, He spoke of the cup and said, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt 26:28).
 - 1. Luke’s account refers to this cup as symbolizing “the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20).
 - 2. When the apostle Paul recited the narrative he had received concerning the Last Supper, he quoted these words of Jesus about the cup as “the new covenant in My blood” (1 Cor 11:25).
- E. The epistle to the Hebrews gives the new covenant more attention than any other book in the New Testament.
 - 1. It includes the entire passage from Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Heb 8:8-12).
 - 2. Jesus is also referred to by the writer of Hebrews as “the Mediator of the new covenant” (Heb 9:15; 12:24).
 - 3. The covenant of promise is a “better covenant...established on better promises” (Heb 8:6) and rests directly on the sacrificial work of Christ.
 - 4. The new covenant accomplished what the old could not, i.e., the removal of sin and cleansing of the conscience (Heb 10:2, 22).
 - 5. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross thus makes the old covenant *obsolete* and fulfills the promise of the prophet Jeremiah (Heb 8:13).

Invitation

- I. Unlike the Mosaic covenant, the new covenant is intended for all humanity—not just one nation or race of people.
- II. In the Great Commission Jesus sent His apostles into *all the world* so they could tell the story of the cross (Luke 24:46-47; Matt 28:18-20).
- III. The gospel call extends to you today!

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